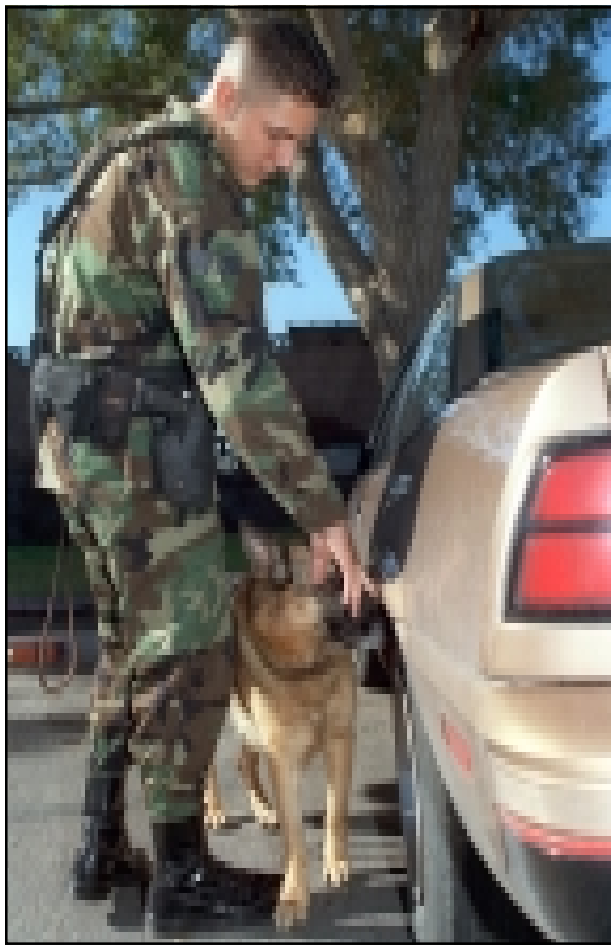




Staff Sgt. Ian Smith



Senior Airman James Simpach and his K-9 partner, Best, conduct a routine bomb search on a vehicle.



Staff Sgt. Joseph Correllier, of the 99th Security Forces Squadron, takes his partner Brick through a series of jumps during training.



Danny



Kahn stands guard as his partner, Staff Sgt. Robert Rybak, frisks a possible suspect, Senior Airman Russell Dillon, during a training exercise.



Photos by Senior Airman Molly A. Gilliam

Staff Sgt. Ryber Rubak, of the 99th Security Forces Squadron, trains his K-9 partner Kahn for live fire.

On ‘Pawtrol’

By Ms. Susan McCarty
AWFC Public Affairs

Being a member of a tight-knit unit is a matter of pride at any Air Force base, and the four-legged members of the 99th Security Forces Squadron, Military Working Dogs Unit, are no exceptions. Along with their human counterparts, the dogs stationed at the base kennels are regarded as experts in their field.

The unit, commanded by Staff Sgt. Jed Traush, currently boasts nine dogs and 11 handlers.

“The Air Force decides what size kennels each base will have,” Sgt. Traush explained. “Some bases have as few as four or five dogs, while some of the bigger bases have up to 15 dogs.”

While Sgt. Traush doesn’t “work” a dog at this time, he is responsible for procuring equipment, setting the training standards and performing spot inspections.

“If we’re not up to speed on something, I draw up some new criteria for training,” he explained.

The dogs, which are obtained from private breeders in both Europe and the United States, are initially trained at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, and can remain active for a number of years.

“The average retirement age for a dog is from 10 to 12 years,” Sgt. Traush explained.

“When they’re old enough to retire, or if there’s a health issue, then the dog is sent back to Lackland.”

Two of the dogs at Nellis are certified as patrol dogs, two are patrol/narcotics dogs and five of the animals are certified for patrol/explosives. All of the dogs are tattooed for identification purposes.

According to Sgt. Traush, the unit tries to keep handlers and dogs together “as long as we can.”

“We average about two years,” he said. “The dogs are trained to be tolerant of the other handlers but work best with just one handler. We try to keep them with that one.”

The dogs at Nellis are considered somewhat young, with the average age being between 3 and 5 years. According to Sgt. Ian Smith, who handles “Blacky,” a rare, pure-black German Shepherd, most of the handlers are relatively new to the canine unit and two of them don’t yet have dogs. One of the men may face a wait of up to a year before he’s assigned a canine partner.

“It usually takes a while to get a dog. It’s a long wait,” Sgt. Smith said.

Becoming a dog handler is a matter of training above and beyond that of the regular security forces requirements. All handlers are volunteers, although few are actually chosen for the 13-week training course held at the canine school at Lackland.

One of those graduates was Senior Air-

man Kevin Gunmoe, who has been handling “Danny,” a three-year-old black and brown German Shepherd, since May of this year. Amn. Gunmoe is very happy to have been selected to join the unit at Nellis.

“I have a good career as a dog handler,” he said. “Historically, only officers in the security forces could qualify for the canine unit.”

According to Amn. Gunmoe, Danny’s previous handler had been injured during training, and the animal had to be re-assigned another handler. “It was hard for Danny,” Amn. Gunmoe said. “It took about two weeks before he developed a good rapport with me.”

Another 3-year-old German Shepherd working in the unit is “Brick,” handled by Staff Sgt. Joseph Cornellier. This team has only been together since July and was certified for duty Sept. 2. As part of their certification, Brick, a narcotics dog, had to successfully complete a series of drug scenarios

— locating contraband hidden in various buildings, parking lots and warehouses on the base.

The unit’s trainer is Senior Airman Russell Dillon. He has been working in that capacity at Nellis for the last

five months. He previously worked as a handler for about a year and a half.

“I have to make sure the dogs are trained right, and I’ve been really lucky. We have great people and great dogs and that makes my job a lot easier,” he said, adding Nellis is his “first kennel.”

As trainer, Amn. Dillon sets up training problems, or situations that could be faced by the dogs and their handlers.

“I set up explosives, drug and attack scenarios,” he said. “Last week we were doing a building search and the dogs were looking for me or anybody else who was hidden where they weren’t supposed to be.”



A basic part of a dog’s training is based on a reward system, according to Amn. Dillon.

Repetition also plays a large part in each dog’s training, but setting up a variety of scenarios is very important to the dogs’ professional development. “We have to maintain a fine balance between the two,” he said. “Too much of the same thing and the dogs will get bored, but they have to learn the smells of explosives and narcotics.”

Work, work, work, is not all that goes on at the Nellis kennels, though. According to Sgt. Traush, the handlers also take the time to groom, bathe and play with their four-legged partners, which adds to the development of close bonds between the trainers and their animals.

“It’s really hard on a person when it’s time to give up their dog,” he said. “It’s the worst part of the job.”

Amn. Dillon knows first-hand what that experience is like. For one year he worked with Blacky, who is now being trained to work with Sgt. Smith.

“I do miss having a dog,” Amn. Dillon admitted. “On the one hand I get to see them (Sgt. Smith and Blacky) progressing as a team, but on the other hand...that’s my dog.”

While all of the dogs are attack and patrol trained, some of them are also “specialists,” experts on detecting explosives or drugs. For example, “Best” is unflappable

when working in a gunfire situation.

“He’s the best with that training,” acknowledged his handler, Sgt. James Simpach. The 5-year-old German Shepherd has been working with Sgt. Simpach for two and one-half years. Working with the dogs while live ammunition is being used around them is all part of the training program.

“We teach the dogs not to be scared in certain situations,” Sgt. Simpach explained. “It also teaches a dog to be obedient.”

While the handlers understand the public’s urge to come up and pet one of their charges, they urge caution when approaching a trained attack dog.

“Some of the dogs are very protective of their handlers and all of them are trained to protect them without command. Having someone walk up to them can be viewed as an aggressive act,” said Amn. Dillon. “It’s always best to ask the handler before you get too close.”

The well-trained dogs and dedicated handlers aren’t just restricted to working at Nellis.

“The bomb dogs go all over the world, working to secure areas visited by the president and vice president,” Sgt. Traush said. “They are also used to search for explosives at areas visited by foreign dignitaries.” According to Sgt. Traush, Nellis dogs have worked in Japan, China, Hawaii, the Philippines and South Africa. “We also work with

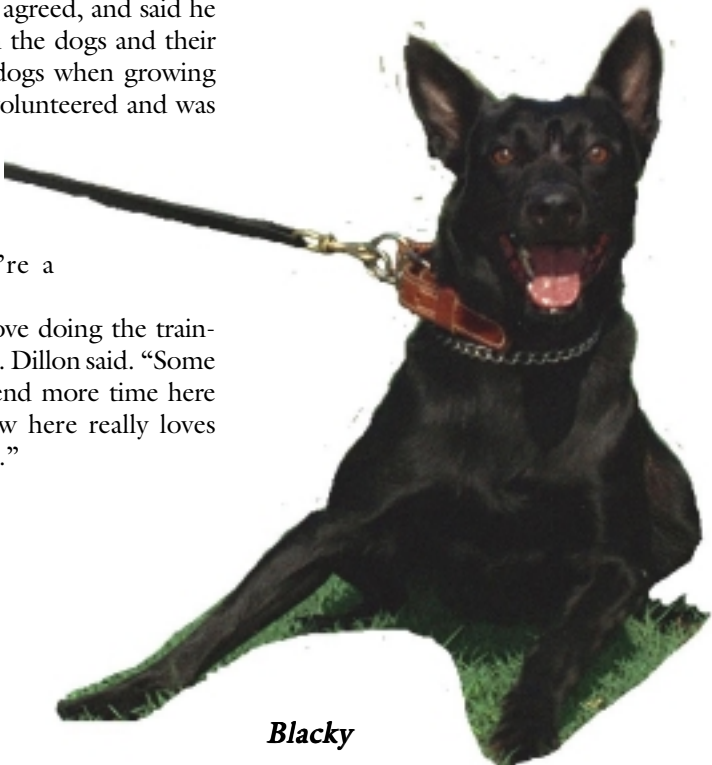
customs officials down at the (Mexican) border from time to time,” he said.

One of the teams is currently on assignment in Saudi Arabia.

All of the handlers were unanimous in their opinion about one thing – to become good handlers people have to have a serious dedication to their work and their animals.

Sgt. Traush, who is a seven-and-a-half year veteran of the unit, agreed, and said he really likes working with the dogs and their handlers. “I never had dogs when growing up,” he recalled, “so I volunteered and was lucky enough to be accepted. I’ve been at it as long as I have been because I love doing it so much. We’re a pretty close-knit unit.”

“You just gotta love doing the training with the dogs,” Amn. Dillon said. “Some of our guys seem to spend more time here than at home. The crew here really loves working with their dogs.”



Blacky